

August 7, 2019

An open letter to

Mr. Robert Loia, Principal, Cardinal Newman School  
Most Rev. Robert E. Gugliemone, Bishop of the Diocese of Charleston  
Mrs. Sandra Leatherwood, Superintendent of Catholic Schools, Diocese of Charleston  
Mrs. Jacqueline Kasproski, Associate Director for Secondary Education, Diocese of Charleston  
Very Rev. Canon Gary S. Linsky, V. F., Rector, The Basilica of Saint Peter  
Mrs. Audrey Wall, St. Peter's Catholic School, Principal  
Fr. Sandy McDonald, Pastor, St. John Neumann Catholic Church  
Mr. Ronald Poles, Principal, St. John Neumann Catholic School  
Rev. Msgr. Richard D. Harris, V.G., Pastor, St. Joseph Catholic Church  
Mr. Donovan Yarnall, St. Joseph Catholic School  
Fr. Michael C. Okere, Pastor, St. Martin de Porres Catholic Church  
Mrs. Delores Gilliard, Principal, St. Martin de Porres Catholic School  
Mrs. María del Mar Muñoz-Visoso, Executive Director of the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops  
Mrs. Valerie E. Washington, Executive Director, National Black Catholic Congress  
Members of the Cardinal Newman School Community

The following comments are the sentiments of African American and other concerned parents within the Cardinal Newman community.

As reported in *The State* newspaper and later in an email to parents from the Cardinal Newman administration on August 2, 2019, a student made violent threats against African Americans, derogatively referred to as "niggers." The videos that have circulated are both scary and disturbing. They also clearly demonstrate that the student had the means to carry out his threats to "shoot up the school." There is no doubt that the sentiments were meant for the African American students within the school.

We live in a time when acts of racist violence are prominent. Our society is brewing with undercurrents of racial animus, and African Americans and other people of color must fear for the safety of our families. However, we did not expect to have such a direct threat within our school.

While the school learned of the threats in mid-July, parents did not learn of them until early August. In a letter from Principal Loia sent to the community on Sunday, August 4, 2019, he stated that the "school leadership team and/or diocesan officials" did not believe the school community was in danger thus did not feel the need to communicate with us.

Let us be clear: the school administrators and diocesan leadership let their position of white privilege cloud their judgment. *They do not have the right to make a decision as to when our children may or may not be in danger* following such a clearly documented desire for harm. This position of white privilege led the administration to believe they could make that decision for us.

The letter of August 4th also indicated that "threat had been neutralized." This is simply not the case. One student has been removed from the school, but his willingness to share his actions with other students within the school leads us to believe that there is a budding, if not vibrant, culture accepting of his views.

In fact, concerns about the racist actions of students, administrators, and teachers or staff have been routinely dismissed over the years. White privilege has allowed and continues to allow members of the school community to discount, downplay, or even misrepresent the feelings and concerns of people of color. White privilege often attempts to mute our voices when we ask issues of diversity and inclusion to be addressed. However, after watching the videos of this student, our voices will not be silenced.

The history of silencing our concerns has led some members of our community to say that they were unaware of racial animus within the school community. Hear us now and believe us when we tell you that our children are the targets of and witnesses to hurtful, racially motivated speech and behavior from members of this community.

For some in the Cardinal Newman community it may be easy to watch the videos we saw and say that “he was just joking” or deny that he is a racist because “he has Black friends” or, even worse, that he did it for “shock value.” But he didn’t laugh. In fact, he thanked viewers for watching. History clearly documents that lynching people of color is used as a form of entertainment, and this is not in the distant past. In 2011 in Jackson, Mississippi, a group of white men and women in their 20s killed James Craig Anderson when they ran over him with a truck. They had a history of attacking groups of Black people with slingshots and bottles for sport.

Be clear on this: someone else’s joke can have dire, even fatal, outcomes for others and *sorry is not enough*.

Members of the African American community of Cardinal Newman FEEL this threat in a real way today. OUR children were the intended targets of his “joke.” We are confident that had an African American child threatened to kill all of the white children of the school, issues of confidentiality would have been abandoned and action swift in notifying the community. There have been other situations of lesser significance where the community was notified immediately through robo-call, email, and text. So, why a change in policy now?

We are also concerned because as became clear in a meeting with Principal Loia on August 5, 2019, the student had been allowed to withdraw from the school rather than face expulsion. While the administration moved swiftly to remove the student from the school community, it failed to fully hold him accountable for his actions by allowing him to leave without a disciplinary action on his academic transcript. This is unacceptable.

Further, removing one student from the school does nothing to address the root causes leading to racist ideology. The former student and community with whom he felt comfortable sharing these videos were socialized both in and outside the walls of this school. What comments did the students who received the videos make about them? How are other students responding? How many of them have been dismissive and support the student who made the threat? How do such comments make our students, especially our African American students (and families) feel about their level of support and safety among their peers?

We are thankful that one parent was vigilant enough to speak up and bring this situation to light. Yet, we are concerned about the subsequent actions taken by the school.

The investigation into this incident involved a number of other students who received the videos via a group messaging app. At least one of these students may have had the most violent threat, the video in which the student threatened to shoot up the school, in his possession since sometime in May. As of August 5th, this student had not been interviewed by school officials (though his parents had) and he remains enrolled at Cardinal Newman. The cyber bullying policy in the school’s handbook clearly states,

In a school where integrity matters, students and employees who are bystanders or witnesses have a RESPONSIBILITY to demonstrate compassionate support for the targeted person and to report dangerous behaviors and/or situations to appropriate school personnel (p. 44).

The failure to report this incident immediately not only endangered the lives of all members of the Cardinal Newman community it also constituted a serious breach of the school’s discipline policies, and as such, should be met with an appropriate disciplinary response. The school’s failure to address this student’s involvement in these events, in particular, has left many parents in the uncomfortable position of having to decide whether it is safe for their children to return to Cardinal Newman on August 20th when the new academic year begins. To assuage these concerns, we strongly recommend that the school administration remove this student, and any others who may have had knowledge of this video, from the school community before the beginning of the school year.

Despite the fact that the student who made these videos is connected to a family with long, deep political and financial connections within the State of South Carolina, their position of prominence should not shield this young man from increased scrutiny and accountability within the justice system. Nor should the family backgrounds or connections of students who received these messages and did not report them shield them from disciplinary action by the school.

As administrators, whether religious or political within the school and larger community, you have a responsibility to speak up and educate the entire community that racism is not a Black person’s issue. The policies often taken for granted by the larger society contribute to systematic forms of racism in our schools, churches, and extended community. This issue requires acknowledgment of a problem by the majority white community within our schools and neighborhoods and a true commitment to speak the truth and act on the side of justice.

The initial letter from Principal Loia to parents emphasized efforts to maintain the security of the school building and to work with law enforcement when threats arose. In closing, let us outline immediate and long-term well researched, high-impact practices that go beyond campus security:

1. The school should address both the emotional and physical safety of students in the aftermath of this incident. Students who make light of the incident may, in fact, be deeply anxious about what transpired and are just posturing. The school should create opportunities and safe spaces for students to talk about their fears under the guidance of a licensed counselor.
2. The school should hold an in-school meeting at the beginning of the year to address with students what happened and the impact on the community and to name the behaviors as racist, unacceptable, harmful, un-Christian, and antithetical to Catholic teaching. In addition, the school should review the standards for behavior and safety for all students and the expectations related to respect of others and the obligation to report bullying and threatening words or actions to persons in authority. Ignoring what happened will create MORE harm to our children and gives a pass to others to behave in dangerous ways.
3. Implicit bias training should be incorporated into the professional development training for all faculty and staff for staff development days at the **beginning** of the 2018-2019 school year. The focus would include going beyond "what is bias" to include recognizing biased behaviors in self/others, training on how to address biased words/actions on school grounds/events from a developmental perspective, and understanding the impact of bias on students both short and long-term.
4. Administrators and all theology faculty should participate in continuing education programs offered by the Institute of Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans, Louisiana, beginning this academic year. Alternately, the school and the diocese should contract with the Institute of Black Catholic Studies to design and deliver professional development for all religious education teachers in the diocese.
5. The school should develop opportunities for Cardinal Newman students to travel to Montgomery, Alabama, to engage in co-curricular learning at the Lynching Memorial, Civil Rights Memorial, and other social justice sites that speak to a recent legacy of hatred in the United States and subsequent acts of justice to address acts of racial injustice.
6. The entire school community should read and study the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' 2018 pastoral letter against racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*. Age-appropriate study materials should be obtained to effectively incorporate this letter into all theology classes. Themes from this letter should inform homilies delivered at school Masses throughout the academic year.
7. The administration should invite professionals to assist in curriculum development to create an inclusive curriculum where the contributions and experiences of racial/ethnic minorities and women in history, the sciences, mathematics, literature, and the Catholic faith, among others, are represented.
8. The school should hire a full time Dean of Diversity and Inclusion responsible for regular oversight of the curriculum and to work in conjunction with the assistant vice principal for professional development. Moreover, this position would also work with elementary school administrators and community members so that diversity and inclusion is integrated into curriculum of elementary and middle schools serving prospective students. As a result, students in the feeder schools will also be socialized in a diverse environment and prepared to enter into Cardinal Newman with an understanding of the school's commitment to diversity and inclusion.
9. The school should create a Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Council to work in tandem with the Dean of Diversity. This council will comprise parents and interested community stakeholders to safely speak to the needs of the youth without fear of retaliation.
10. The school administration, in conjunction with the Office of Education for the Diocese of Charleston, should develop and implement a strategic plan to recruit, hire, and retain a diverse faculty and staff representative of the student body. Our students often comment that the only paid staff of color are the custodial staff. Other than a recent faculty hire, there is a negligible representation of African American and Latino faculty on campus. This is unacceptable.

11. The school should obtain the services of an external consultant with the input of parents and the Institute of Black Catholic Studies to conduct focus groups among our students. The outcome of these focus groups will be a campus climate report written with the administration and the advisory committee.
12. The school should hold any and all staff, past and present, accountable for their actions or failure to act in a way that limited transparency and placed our families at risk. Is the way this situation was and continues to be handled consistent with the message of the Catholic Church and the teachings of Christ to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22: 34-40), without any caveats attached to this directive?

Lastly, we have begun and will continue to speak publicly about this issue at both the local and national levels within the Catholic Church and beyond. The Church has ample resources of professionals, especially African American clergy and lay people, who can help us through this process. The administration's failure to act with transparency in both the immediate and long-term response to this event will be interpreted as turning your back on our children and as a desire to maintain policies that contribute to systematic forms of racism in our schools, churches, and larger communities.

While many of us welcome an opportunity to work with you, we also ask, "Will you act on the side of transparency and justice or hide behind policies that have traditionally silenced African American parents at Cardinal Newman School?"

Having our children attend Cardinal Newman is a conscious choice we make to further instill and reinforce Christian values in our children. We want our children to grow and develop not only intellectually but spiritually with like-minded peers. While we value the educational and spiritual experiences our children are receiving at Cardinal Newman however, without serious consideration of and immediate response to these action items, some of us would have to seriously consider other educational options for our children.

In the words of St. Ignatius of Loyola, "Love ought to show itself in deeds more than in words."

Respectfully submitted on behalf of a concerned group of Cardinal Newman families.

A sign-up sheet to join the letter will be available during the town hall meeting at Cardinal Newman School on Thursday, August 8, 2019.